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PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF 'ETERNAL TRUTHS'

ETERNAL truths, the goal of philosopher and visionary, are having a hard time of it, nowadays, with all the theories spun about them. These theories seem to have brought them down to the level of pure hypotheses, a social necessity or a personal convenience. Looking at the matter ultra-pragmatically one might be tempted to say that men have become so wearied of the pursuit after such truths that they feel a deep inner need of berating the elusive things, much as the fox criticized the grapes. For all this, there is still another line of approach which, so far as I know, has never been fairly pursued, and which, though plainly not leading directly to a solution of all the problems involved, nevertheless seems to take us to a point where certain fundamental descriptions are easy and sure. I refer here to the investigation of our immediate experiences of the meanings expressed in the so-called eternal truths. In particular we must first be interested not in the truthfulness of these meanings, but rather in their supposed eternal character. For empiricists the experience of a truth does not offer so many profound perplexities as the experience of its eternal character. Believing firmly that every meaning has a concrete basis in immediate experience, one naturally wonders how we can ever experience eternity, even representatively. It will prove highly instructive, I am sure, if we can make this point clear without resorting to mystical notions about 'social necessity,' 'heart-hunger for the eternal,' and the like which pervade so much current literature with their hazy glamor.

The fact that we mean something when we hear or use the adjective 'eternal' I take to be absolute evidence for the further fact that there is some typical experience here involved and awaiting empirical description. This description must be rendered before the nature of eternal truths or 'objectively valid propositions' can be expatiated upon. For it is a commonplace of psychology to-day that time is only an experience-quality, just as space, light, feeling, etc., are, so that whoever qualifies anything as 'eternal' is deliberately bringing it into connection with a certain experience-quality.

The empiricist wants to know precisely what all this *means* before he attempts to champion or condemn; furthermore, he is impatient with all harangues basing upon the dreadful consequences of doubting eternal truths, so long as these latter have not yet been given an unequivocal significance that can be verified by anybody.

At the outset it is clear that, in experiencing the meanings we come to call true, this trueness is not a part of any such meaning itself, but rather a qualification reflectively added to the meaning as a whole for some reason or other. I assume that everybody recognizes the *a posteriori*, 'external' character of all worth-qualities. As James says, no 'click in our mental machinery' labels meanings true or false, real or unreal, as they pop up into mental view. It now behooves us to inquire whether the quality of 'eternality' is given or derived, a peculiarity of immediate experience or one of reflective constructions. An overwhelming verdict in favor of the latter view is handed down by philosophers and psychologists alike, all agreeing that it is a stupid *contradictio in adjecto* to speak of experiencing all times in one present moment. Even those who find certain difficulties in this answer do no more than to say that the present experience contains phases which represent or function for all other time-experiences. The numerous types of such interpretation can not even be named here; only this must be noted, that in almost every such interpretation the time-qualification is reflectively added in the same general way that the validity-qualification is, thus leaving us to conclude that the meaning 'eternal' is joined to the 'true' meaning *on the ground of something else*, this something else being presumably a worth of some sort. This seems to be, in rough, the idea recently developed by Royce.¹

Space forbids here every criticism of the philosophy of eternal truths, but I would suggest that our theorists make a sharper distinction between the eternal and the timeless, two concepts which, though often enough marked off from each other by thinkers, tend constantly to run together. Psychologically the eternal is intricately connected with duration; it means unlimited duration in every conceivable connection of thought. To speak of truths as eternal is to assert that certain worths endure forever, a proposition to which all empiricists with one accord must take exception in so far as they find themselves compelled to treat the statement as unproved and probably unprovable. But, on the other hand, the timeless is merely

¹ 'The Eternal and the Practical,' *Philosophical Review*, Vol. XIII., pp. 113 ff. To my mind, the attempt to turn what is primarily a time-quality into nothing more than a value is rather adventurous, because it confuses psychological description with philosophical interpretation, and thus invites all sorts of semireligious notions into the fold of scientific thinking.

that which has nothing to do with time, whether duration, simple change or succession. And this concept has a psychological basis utterly different from that of eternity, as I shall now try to show.

Turning to any experience-moment, we find an aggregate of primitive qualities—or better, simple meanings—forming a vague totality bound together by little more than its own ‘now-ness’ or ‘given-ness.’ So far as our ability to describe them goes, the differences between these meanings are quite as primitive as the meanings themselves. At least it is sure that, even if their differences are not ‘given’ in quite the same way the meanings themselves are, this does not contrive to make these latter alike; a color is not a sound, even when their difference has not yet been apperceived. Now, among the primitive meanings we find duration, simple change and succession, each a perfectly distinct character, however much it may be involved with others. Moreover, a confusion of red with change, or of sweet with duration is, at least for all modern-day experience, impossible; nor does this impossibility base solely upon the verbal definition of the qualities in question, but rather upon the character of the experiences themselves. The difference is not a matter of degree, as some metaphysicians would like to have it; when I say that duration has no color, I mean something totally different from what I would in saying that a man’s face is colorless. When I say that change does not taste, I do not mean that it is tasteless as boiled water is, *i. e.*, that its taste is practically a negligible quality. In the same way, though less clearly perhaps, the duration of an experience-moment wherein we experience a color is not a quality of the color, but only a dependent phase in the mental act. As Stumpf’s classical monograph on space-perception and, more recently, Husserl’s development of logical descriptions, have well shown, the independent *variables* in an experience-complex may depend for their empirical existence upon other phases in the complex, and yet not be properly qualified by these. Variations in color are independent of spatial and temporal variations, and so on. We have, then, meanings of the sensational order which are timeless in the strictest sense of this word.²

²It may be said that beyond certain limits a color is modified by its extension; that the succession of one and the same beat, if rapid enough, transforms the beat into a tone, and so on. These facts, however, are so highly complicated that I must forbear explaining them here. Enough to say that in all such cases we do not have a variation in the mere time-quality alone, but what is most significant, a *parallel* variation in color, sound or the like. There is no sort of causal connection here; it being impossible to think of the time-variation as preceding the other ones in time. This hint may be useful in warning us away from the most serious of the many possible misinterpretations.

The second point to note is the commonest phenomenon of mental life, namely, the transfer of meanings from one aggregate to another. This is what is called reproduction, or in certain cases memory. Meanings here break loose from their original setting wherein they are implicated with a time-element (a 'Now'); they function in wholly new combinations involving new time-elements. Now the fact that I can now compare a red seen yesterday with a red I now see without involving thereby a comparison of the time-qualities, strikes me as very simple and binding evidence of the independence of color-qualities in a new sense whose significance has possibly been over-neglected. Not only is red something totally different from duration as simple quality (or 'pure' experience), but its persistence in mental life is not colored by any temporal qualities in connection with which it may have occurred. The red I saw a year ago *means* something to me which has not been undergoing a change in *meaning* ever since I first saw it; and when the psychologist opposes this with the remark that we all do forget and confuse past experience-qualities, we must reply that forgetting such qualities is not the same as changing them, and that every confusion can be verified only because somebody is able to compare past with present. Even in those cases where a genuine confusion occurs, however, it is not the time-quality of either term which has anything to do with the confusion; it is a confusion of many terms so nearly alike that the phenomena of least perceptible difference and attention play a weighty rôle.

All this, of course, does not hinder us from admitting that meanings can be 'dated,' *i. e.*, recognized as having occurred in another experience-complex than the one colored with the present 'Now.' For, as we shall soon have occasion to emphasize, experience-complexes of nearly all sorts persist unaffected by time-qualities precisely as the simplest colors, tones, tastes, etc., do. Thus we have the peculiar but by no means mystical phenomenon of the independent persistence of part-meanings and of group-meanings composed organically of these same part-meanings. There is a whole world of intricacies wrapped up in this general fact, a world full of work for psychologist and logician alike. Here, however, we must be content with the widest generalization alone, which bases directly upon the multirelativity of pure experience-parts, which James has described in outline.³

³ Perhaps some occasion will arise where I may show how the deep truth of James's theory needs restatement in order to be ready for the philosophical fray. The distinction between experiences and pure experiences, as well as the description of present experiences as 'representing' or 'knowing' past ones, can not help leading to the gravest misinterpretations, as the criticisms advanced at the recent Psychological Congress at Rome can testify.

The other than temporal relations in which any meaning stands depend wholly upon the particular character of the meaning itself, the meaning to which it is related, and what may generally be called the relating 'medium' or the other meanings necessarily involved in the construction of the relational one. Thus the relation of tones in a harmony depends upon the intervals (not temporal) and the individual tone-qualities. The fact that a wholly different complex-effect is gained by introducing temporal differentia, thus producing a simple melody, in no wise affects what we have said, but simply shows that time-elements may sometimes be 'parts' of an experience-complex. It would be ridiculous to say that the experience we call a harmony is 'qualified' by the simultaneity of its elements and, therefore, is a temporal experience in the sense here under discussion. For all we thus far maintain is that the harmony-meaning is not a time-meaning, and that further it can be shifted, *as a meaning*, from one complex to another without affecting its significant identity. What makes the harmony, as we experience it directly, is not the simultaneity of its parts in the sense that the succession of the parts of a melody makes up this latter. In the former case the so-called time-quality does not 'belong' to the harmoniousness, while in the latter instance we feel the intervals and successions out and out as *being* melodious.

What now of those experiences containing meanings which in retrospect are called eternal truths? Is it all a matter of reflection? Plainly not. Whenever I experience the binomial theorem meaningfully; that is, whenever I understand what is meant by the term, I may describe my experience as above. First, I experience no duration. The duration 'of the moment' is, of course, quite real, but, as a logician would say, irrelevant; that is, it is another meaning, just as taste is not sound or a triangle not a vertigo. Secondly, the meaning 'binomial theorem' may persist in my thinking, *i. e.*, through an indefinite number of experience-complexes involving different time-qualities, and not change in the least. Thus yesterday I may have experienced 'the binomial theorem is hard to learn'; to-day, 'the binomial theorem is the basis of all higher algebraic operations'; and to-morrow, 'I've forgotten the confounded binomial theorem.' In each case I experience the same unitary meaning; even in experiencing that I have forgotten it, I am experiencing it just as psychologically as ever, save that I am now unable to use it in the way for which it is fitted by its own peculiar character. And, lastly, the binomial theorem has no time-factors as internal organic constituents; its *a*'s and *b*'s and equalities are not historically located so that their dates determine in any way the meaning of the complex.

That all this can be said of logical propositions may be seen upon simple trial. As a mere description of our experiences of the meanings the three distinct types of timelessness are beyond dispute. But they afford us absolutely no clue to the way whereby men come to call certain meanings true and others false, some fleeting and some invariable. Just because of their inability to do this they have been neglected by humanists far more than is justified by the philosophical situation of our times. It is perfectly true that the sort of timelessness above described is found even in senseless and absurd meanings. And it is further true that nobody can *know* that the thing thought of an hour ago is now being thought of in such a way that there is absolutely no difference in its meaning-organization involved in the repetition.

There is no need to shilly-shally about this fundamental solipsism; the escape does not lie in fancy theories explaining the fact away, but rather in a frank acceptance both of it and of the practical way we overcome its theoretical disadvantages. We do gain the mastery over our world of meanings by the simple device of meaning the something and trusting to its own efficiency to carry us through. Even in the course of a simple argument I have no means of demonstrating that the man Smith I had in mind at the outset is even functionally the same as the one of which I now talk. Indeed, any demonstration would merely assume what it seeks to prove. But at every point in the same argument I do *refer* with full awareness to the same identical meaning (unless I am a sophist or other intellectual conjurer). I *mean* by the man Smith absolutely the same individual that I meant three sentences back; and about this intentional reference there can be no more doubt than there can be about the red I now sense or the warmth I feel. The humanistic contention that this identity of meaning gains its sole 'verification' in its practical results can not be challenged. But it is clear that even the most practical results are meanings in the ideal sense, so that the whole tale must be retold of them too. When I call a thing practical or true, unless it be that its full practicability is being simultaneously experienced, I am making the same reference, immediate and undemonstrably valid; so that, after all, *the ultimate practicability of anything is its ability to be referred to as an identical meaning*. Upon this every other utility rests. If the thing or quality or meaning of other sort be incapable of persisting as identical, breaking loose from its warm setting of sense and entering into colder groups, then it is not only useless, but for all practical purposes non-existent. To paraphrase a brilliant thought of Janet's, however keen the sensual or intellectual pleasure of an experience

might be, if, after its brief sensational existence I could not even *refer* to it, it might as well have been a pang of bitterest sorrow. This identity of meaning is, however, given me as really as anything can be. It is quite immaterial whether or not the psychological processes vary with the recall, whether the memory-image is each time a new one or not; so long as the true thought-object is the one referred to, there is some hope that I can turn it to account. Otherwise neither absolutist nor humanist can say anything about it. So, after all, the mere psychological timelessness of meanings, either as genuine recurrents or as objects of reference (ideal, assumed recurrents), is the point of departure for every logical theory and not the goal of the visionary. What we are all looking for in active life, however, is not non-temporal meanings, but rather ones that will wear well. And neither logic nor psychology has the monopoly on these.

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THE IDEAS AND TERMS OF MODERN PHILOSOPHICAL ANATOMY.¹

THE ideas of philosophical anatomy have been developed during three periods of human thought: First, the Greek, in which adaptation was clearly perceived as the central phenomenon of life, in its morphological and physiological expression. Second, the pre-Darwinian period, in which the idea of the environmental relations was developed especially by Bacon; and various forms of morphological, physiological and especially psychical adaptation were developed gradually through the studies of Buffon, Lamarek, Geoffroy St. Hilaire and more especially Goethe; adaptations began to be distinguished broadly into *primary*, or those which had been of use in past time, and *secondary*, or those which were recent in origin and in full use at the present time. Even prior to these writers, however, Vesalius in his studies of human anatomy perceived the importance of this distinction. Philosophical anatomy really owes to Darwin himself the fundamental ideas which are involved in the terms primitive, retrogressive, progressive and dominant, and are understood with increasing clearness. This is the third period of anatomy as established on evolution. Huxley in his brilliant essay of 1880 on 'The Laws of Evolution as Applied to the Mammalia' was the first to emphasize persistent primitive characters and modernized or adaptive characters, laying great stress on the importance of the former in questions of phylogeny. Among many

¹ Presented before the New York Academy of Sciences, April 10, 1905.